



CITIZENS' COMMISSION ON JAIL VIOLENCE POSSIBLE PROCESS FOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

The Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence (CCJV) was charged by the Board of Supervisors with conducting a review of the "nature, depth and cause of the problem of inappropriate use of force in the jails" and recommending "corrective actions as necessary." The Commission was also tasked, as set forth in the Board's enacting motion, with "restor[ing] public confidence in the constitutional operation of our jails by conducting a discussion on the nature and cause of the problem."

In the months ahead, the Commission will hear testimony from percipient witnesses, as well as professionals whose areas of expertise span a variety of areas relevant to our investigatory focus. Any consideration of the state of the County's jails, however, might be incomplete without incorporating the concerns and perspectives of the public at large. In particular, it may be valuable to elicit input from those communities that are disproportionately represented in our jails and, as a result, most impacted (directly and indirectly) by jail conditions. This memorandum sets forth a possible process for engaging those communities.

Background

The CCJV would not be the first group to consider community sentiment as part of an investigatory process aimed at producing recommendations for reform of Sheriff's Department practices. Prior to releasing the 1992 report on the LASD, Special Counsel James G. Kolts and his staff held three public hearings and collected documentation and testimony from over 60 groups and individuals. In his final report, Kolts acknowledged that the sample of those who participate in a community dialogue may be inherently biased towards negative interactions with the agency or system in question, and that it was almost always "impossible to verify the factual accuracy" of the statements made by participants. Nonetheless, the Kolts Report observed that the hearings humanized the documented accounts that the investigation relied on in formulating its recommendations. More importantly, the hearings revealed communities' perceptions about the Sheriff's Department. This was significant because, as the Kolts' Report opined, at times "the perception becomes the reality."

Similar to the Kolts experience, the work of the CCJV might also benefit from initiating a process that could capture community members' experiences with and perceptions of the County jail system. Engaging communities throughout the course of its work will also give the CCJV an opportunity to inform the public of its purpose, focus, timeline, and, ultimately, its findings and recommendations. While the CCJV will undoubtedly want to initiate and conduct community education and outreach efforts at the end of its process -- when its final report and recommendations issue -- engaging the community *earlier* in the process can provide a vehicle

for capturing public sentiments and also ensuring a deeper understanding of and participation in the Commission's work.

A Possible Structure for Community Forum Events

Consistent with the objectives set forth above, but also bearing in mind the breadth of its work and the ambitious timeframe within which to complete its investigatory efforts, the CCJV may wish to consider conducting one or two community forum events sometime in March or April. These events would be open to all members of the public and would be a free flow dialogue, with the CCJV and community members each having an opportunity to listen and speak. At these events, one or two Commissioners could serve as representatives for the CCJV and introduce its purpose, scope, timeline, focus and limitations, as well as answer any questions that may arise.

The CCJV should bear in mind that these events could become emotionally charged. Unlike others whose testimony the CCJV may hear during its public hearings, most residents of these communities will not be speaking from academic or professional knowledge. Like the attendees of Kolts' public hearings, many individuals' stories will be deeply personal and even at times difficult to share. The CCJV members will want to consider, and perhaps seek guidance on, how best to navigate these emotionally charged conversations. In addition, the Commission would want to ensure that the comments of members of the community are recorded and perhaps transcribed for the Commission's future use and consideration.

The CCJV could also consider having a resource table with information that participants might find useful. For example, information on the Office of Independent Review could be made available for individuals who have information on specific, isolated events they believe warrant investigation (as this is outside of the scope of the CCJV); other community groups, as may be appropriate, could be invited to have information available as well.

Possible Locations

It is important that any outreach and education events be held in locations and scheduled at times that are optimally accessible to the community. Additional factors to consider in the selection of locations are its maximum occupancy, parking facilities and proximity to public transportation, and ensuring that there are adequate security protocols. Ideas for possible locations are set forth below (if the Commission opts to move forward with community forum events, we would have one of the Executive Director's staff members engage in further research, possible site visits, and report back to the ad hoc committee on the suitability of one or two proposed locales).

- **Community Landmarks**

The Vision Theatre, on 43rd Street in Leimert Park, is a historical landmark with a rich history. Additionally, it is in a welcoming and diverse community, with both Latino and African American residents. This could be an ideal setting for a community forum.

- **Constituent Service Centers**

The Mark Ridley-Thomas Constituent Center, in South Los Angeles, often hosts public gatherings in its community meeting room. Located near the intersection of South Vermont and West Manchester avenues, the center is accessible by public transportation, via the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) local, rapid, and express bus lines.

- **Community Organization or Agency Facilities**

The California Endowment (TCE) has both experience in working for the benefit of underserved communities and is likely to be supportive of the CCJV's desire to engage communities. Its administrative offices are located on North Alameda Blvd., in close proximity to Metro subway lines, at Union Station. TCE also has a network of community locations and centers, as well as a community outreach network, with which it has offered to connect us.

- **Jordan Downs Community Center**

Located within the Jordan Downs Housing Project, in Watts, this community center was the first one in a South Los Angeles housing project to be resident-managed. Community input, outreach, and grassroots involvement have been an important component of the housing's current redevelopment process and this community center has been the venue for nearly all of those meetings. The center hosts regular, weekly events and any community forum event would need to be scheduled around those scheduled events. The community center is accessible via the MTA's blue line rail as well as its local and shuttle bus lines.

- **Public parks, libraries, fire stations or malls**

The public hearings which were held prior to the Kolts Report took place in public parks. Although any CCJV events would need to be scheduled around other park activities, this is an option worth considering – we would want to make sure, however, that the park space is indoors (an outdoor setting would not be sufficiently controllable or conducive to our dialogue). Another option might be public libraries or community rooms in fire stations (other groups have used fire stations for community dialogues). There are also community rooms available in various shopping centers including the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza. Located at the intersection of Crenshaw Blvd. and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., the plaza also features an LAPD substation and MTA Customer Service Station.

- **USC**

The University of Southern California campus, located in South Los Angeles' diverse West Adams district, offers a variety of general event space options. The school, which

is known for its outreach and student community service in surrounding neighborhoods, has meeting spaces that can accommodate gatherings with capacities of between 30 and 400. Serviced by the MTA's local, rapid, express, and silver bus lines, the campus is readily accessible via public transportation. Additionally, CCJV Commissioner Murray is a senior fellow at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

- **Local Places of Worship**

Most places of worship are actively involved in the community and would most likely be happy to host events such as a community forum. The CCJV has strong ties to the First African Methodist Episcopal (FAME) Church, as Commissioner Murray served as its pastor for nearly thirty years.

Conclusion

Although engaging meaningfully with communities is unlikely to add significantly to the Commission's investigative process, it may render the final report and recommendations more relevant and credible to the public. Moreover, these community sessions could enlighten our work and offer personal stories and insights that underscore the need for reform.